


ALONE IN A RUBBER BOAT



O'ahu's Audrey Sutherland  
has paddled thousands of miles  
solo along some of the world's  
most epic coastlines

STORY BY **AUDREY SUTHERLAND** | PHOTOS BY **DANA EDMUNDS**







# O

**n a cold blustery day along the Gulf of Alaska in 1981, a sea kayaking guide named Ken Leghorn was leading a wilderness paddling expedition around Chichagof Island when he spotted a lone kayaker in the distance ahead. The kayaker was in an inflatable boat that rode high in the water and was being half-paddled and half-blown across the choppy sea. The boat didn't have a proper spray skirt to keep its cockpit dry, and the paddler was getting soaked. As Leghorn approached he saw that the paddler was a woman. She had white hair. And she was singing.**

“My first reaction was, ‘This is a crazy person,’” Leghorn recalls. “I thought it must be somebody who was totally unprepared to be out there. Then I found out it was somebody who has more long-distance sea kayaking experience than I’ll ever have.”

That woman was Audrey Sutherland, solo paddler extraordinaire and epic free spirit. In a kayaking career spanning five decades, Audrey has paddled an estimated twelve thousand nautical miles—the equivalent of half the circumference of Earth. She racked up almost all of that mileage on long, lone voyages in the stubby little blow-up boats she adores, going solo not out of misanthropy or because she’s antisocial but because it’s just easier that way. Her wilderness sagas are not so much about getting away from anything as they are about finding simplicity, with all of the stormy weather, photogenic wildlife, idyllic campsites and cozy little wilderness cabins that go along with it.

Audrey wrote about her earliest paddling treks in her first book, *Paddling My Own Canoe*, her account of the multiple trips she made in the 1950s and 1960s along the north shore of Moloka‘i. The book, which came out in 1978 and went through nine printings, has become a classic in the canon of solo sea voyaging literature. In it she writes, “Always I came back from these trips feeling like a skinned-up kid, feeling like a renewed, re-created adult, feeling like a tiger.”

Her second book, *Paddling Hawaii*, which came out twenty years later, is the authoritative guide to sea kayaking in the Islands. It’s half route planner, half compendium of practical instruction and homespun advice. Need to tenderize an octopus? Audrey suggests dropping it into a washing machine for five minutes. “If

**Grande dame:** Audrey Sutherland (pictured overleaf) is 90 today and still living on the North Shore beach she has called home since before Hawai‘i was a state. In addition to her twenty-three-year, eight-thousand-mile Alaskan odyssey and her heroic paddles in the Hawaiian Islands, Sutherland has paddled in Norway, Greece, France, the Cook Islands and other spots. At left, from top: Audrey surfing a North Shore break; her husband John with his surfboard; the family at home on the North Shore (from left to right: John, Audrey, Noelle, Jock, Ann, James and Scotty the dog); Jock with his first surfboard.



you aren't carrying a washing machine in your kayak, slam the octopus repeatedly on a big rock until it is limp." About to get washed ashore into boulders? Audrey suggests "tucking into a ball to help protect your vital organs. ... It's also useful to go limp like a piece of limu [seaweed] until the wave washes you up the rocks, then grab them and scramble up higher before the next wave."

A third, long-awaited book is due this spring. It's the story of her longest paddle ever, an eighty-seven-day, 887-mile trek through the Inside Passage of Alaska and British Columbia. She wanted to call it *Paddling Southeast Alaska: 800 Miles in a Nine-Foot Boat*, but the publisher has named it *Paddling North*. Monumental as it might have been, that particular trip was just a segment in a greater journey. Every single year from 1980 through 2003, Audrey explored the straits, inlets, fjords, islands and glaciers of Southeast Alaska and British Columbia in her inflatable kayaks, racking up some eight thousand nautical miles over twenty-three consecutive summers. At 59, when others her age might feel adventuresome for booking a stateroom aboard an Alaska cruise ship, Audrey adopted the migratory schedule of a humpback whale, wintering in Hawai'i and traveling to Alaska for the summer, and she maintained it for nearly a quarter of a century.

**I meet Audrey Sutherland** at her beach home near Hale'iwa, and we spend several hours over two days mostly sitting in the Adirondack chairs on her back lānai watching the North Shore afternoons play out over the water. Beside us on the lānai lies one of her kayaks on its side in the shade, fully inflated and ready to go. But it's been a while since it hit the water. Audrey's 90 now, and while she was paddling Alaska into her early 80s, nobody out-paddles age forever. She hasn't been on one of her epic transects since Alaska, and she doesn't even recall the last short paddle she did. I had heard she'd done a short paddle across Kealakekua Bay on her 90th birthday. "Kealakekua doesn't count," she says. "I don't think it was my birthday, either." Kealakekua Bay is just a mile across, and as it turns out, a "short

paddle" for Audrey means something like two hundred miles. And for the record her birthday's in February (same day as Thomas Edison and Daniel Boone, she likes to point out), and she paddled Kealakekua in March or maybe April, she says.

The giant North Shore surf has yet to arrive, but there's still plenty of action to watch from Audrey's lānai. Surfers make the most of a small, late summer swell at Chun's Reef. A big catamaran tracks across the horizon. Stand up paddleboarders come and go. A Coast Guard helicopter flies by. A Coast Guard plane flies by. An outrigger sailing canoe with two men aboard tacks back and forth. The sailing canoe really catches Audrey's eye, and she studies it through her binoculars for markings that might indicate where it's from but she doesn't find any. "Take a look," she says, handing me the binoculars, but I don't find any markings, either. "It's probably out of Hale'iwa," she says. The canoe lands on the beach at Chun's, stays for a while, comes back out, disappears around the point, reappears and eventually capsizes. The two men right the overturned boat and paddle on, dismasted.

Directly in front of Audrey's house is a surf spot called Jocko's, a freight-train left that's named after one of her sons, big-wave pioneer Jock Sutherland. Audrey raised four children largely on her own; her husband left for good when the children were young, and Audrey taught them to be self-sufficient and filled them with her love of reading early on. Near Jocko's there's a spot in the reef with a cave in it, and Audrey says she wants to get out there with her mask, snorkel and fins before the winter surf comes up. "I just want to check in on it," she says, "make sure it's still there." Right in front of her house lies a rocky pocket beach where turtles haul out for their afternoon naps. People who don't know or don't care that it's illegal to harass turtles routinely stop to pose for pictures with them, or worse. "I've seen people do awful things like stand on the turtles," Audrey says. "When they do something really stupid, I stand up and yell." One of her recent projects was to pound a stake into the sand with a sign reading: "Please stay six feet away from the turtles." She thinks she put it too close

to the water, though, and she wants to move it farther up the beach before winter.

**In her prime** Audrey stood five feet, six inches tall and weighed 125 pounds. She suspects she's lost an inch and gained five pounds with age. She has short, wind-tossed white hair and the brightest eyes I may have ever seen. We sit and talk for hours before I notice that she's wearing a touch of lipstick and eye makeup.

She might have tremendous stamina but she's never been particularly strong. Thirty pounds is about the limit of what she can lift over her head, and that's partly why she's drawn to inflatable boats. They are lightweight, and she can lift one overhead or haul it up the beach unassisted. She can also roll one up, stuff it into a duffel bag, get on a plane and go. Or she can land on an Alaskan island, deflate the boat, hitchhike to the other side of the island, inflate the boat and be on her way. It doesn't matter that inflatables go half the speed of their sleeker hard-shell cousins or that they blow sideways in the wind or that smart alecks sometimes call them "rubber duckies." They suit Audrey just fine. And they actually represent a huge advancement over her original marine technology. On one of her earliest trips along Moloka'i's north shore, she had no boat at all. She simply swam. On her first successful trip she put her camera, food and clothing inside a rubber meteorological weather balloon, wrapped that with a shower curtain and stuffed it into an Army clothing bag, then towed it behind her as she swam along the coast. The next time she towed her gear in a two-foot-square Styrofoam box, which worked better. It wasn't until 1967 that she discovered, in a mail-order catalog for backpackers, a six-foot-long French-made inflatable boat. "They called it a kayak, but it looked more like a canoe," she writes in her first book.

When you take into consideration the attention Audrey gives to pre-trip planning, the idea of exploring the sea-locked north side of Moloka'i without a boat, or in a boat you might find in a backyard swimming pool, doesn't seem nearly so harebrained. She is a compulsive planner and someone who thinks through every what-if scenario she can imagine. She's also a tremendous





"The only real security is not insurance or money or a job," says Sutherland, "not a house and furniture paid for or a retirement fund, and never is it another person. It is the skill and humor and courage within—the ability to build your own fires and find your own peace."



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## Alone in a Rubber Boat

list maker. She makes lists for everything. *Paddling Hawaii* starts with a list titled “Why Paddle Hawaii? Twenty-three reasons.” It includes: “Swim naked offshore,” “Vacation for \$5 a day in an ocean-front suite with a private waterfall,” “Roll overboard and hear the whales sing” and “Kids don’t yammer with a paddle in their hands.” Tacked to the bulletin board by her bathroom door is the list she developed during her child-rearing days titled “What every kid should be able to do by age 16.” It includes: “Cook a simple meal,” “Drive a car with skill and sanity,” “Care for tools and always put them away after use,” “Clean a fish and dress a chicken,” “Change a diaper, change a tire,” “Spend the family income for all bills and necessities for two months,” “Save someone from drowning using available equipment,” “Listen to an adult talk, with interest and empathy,” “Dance with any age,” “Be happy and comfortable alone for ten days, ten miles from the nearest other person” and “Do your own laundry.”

Sutherland’s house is an old Army barracks, moved to the North Shore from Wahiawā and turned into a beach house. She’s lived there since 1956, raising her four kids. When we go inside to look at her photo albums, it becomes clear that the house looks the same today as it has over the decades: white wicker chairs, glass fishing floats, tiger shark jaw on the wall. The dining room table around which her four children ate cereal and mugged for the camera hasn’t budged, though now it features a long map of Southeast Alaska marked up with twenty-three years of paddling routes. Another thing that becomes clear from the photos is that Audrey was never some grizzled seagoing hellion. She was actually quite a beauty.

Audrey’s original manuscript for *Paddling North* is a loose-leaf stack of paper as thick as two fat phone books. It starts with a bear turning the doorknob to her cabin—but that’s just a tease, and it quickly backs up to the first time she laid eyes on Southeast Alaska while flying there on a business trip in 1980. There was so much wild country, so few people and so many islands to camp on. The wheels of her mind started turning. Her children were grown, she had been divorced for years and she had a little bit of money saved. She writes:

“I went home and looked at the Five Year Plan on the wall. ... Paddle Alaska, number one. I walked in into the bathroom and looked at the familiar person in the

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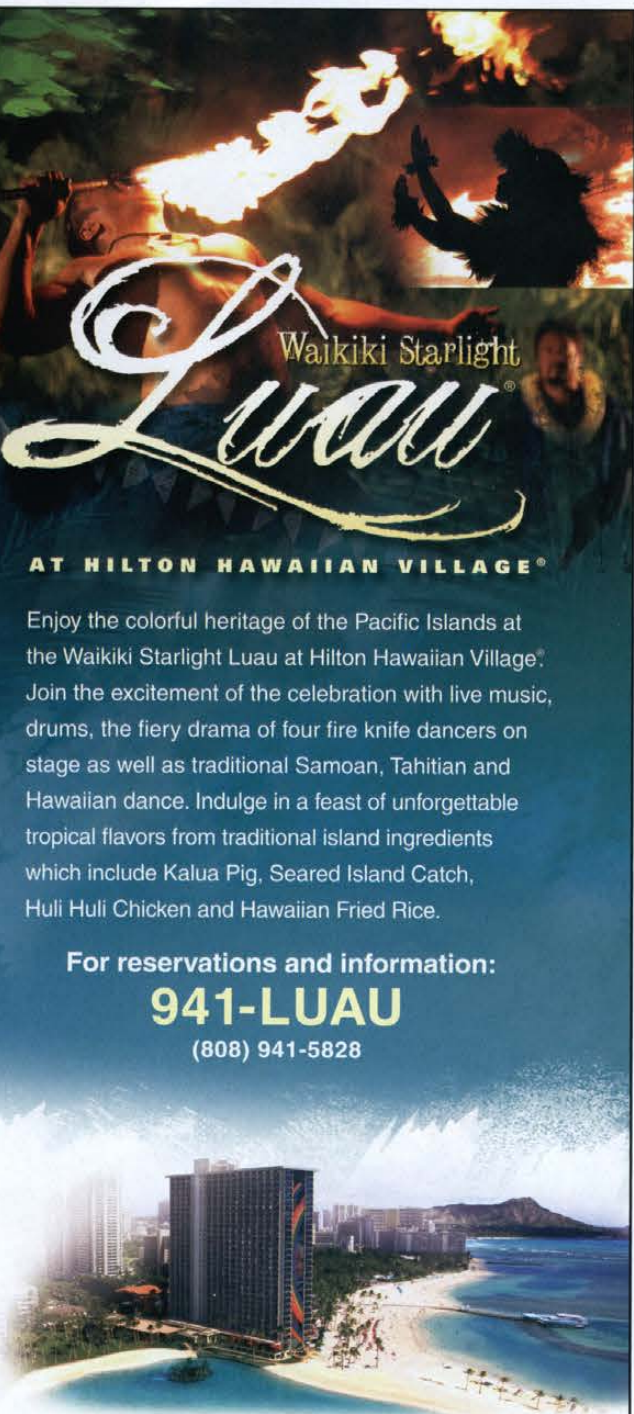
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mirror. 'Getting older aren't you, lady? Better do the physical things now. You can work at a desk later.' The next day I handed in my resignation, effective in two months. ... Sometimes you have to go ahead and do the most important things, the things you believe in, and not wait until years later when you say, 'I wish I had gone—done—kissed.' ... What we most regret are not the errors we make, but the things we didn't do."

From the lānai we see three people picking their way across the rocks on the beach and approaching the turtles that have hauled out. "Do they see the sign?" Audrey asks. It's not clear whether they do, but they see us staring at them, and while they look tempted to manhandle the wildlife, they keep their distance. At one point two spearfishermen appear towing a float with a "diver down" flag. Audrey frowns. The area has been badly overfished, she says. It's not like the old days when you could just jump in and come back with a lobster for dinner or an octopus for the washing machine. She tells me about a fish friend of hers named Kahu. "He was a puffer fish," she says. "Scientific name *Diodon hystrix*, I think." Kahu can mean "leader" in Hawaiian, and when she used to take the children snorkeling in front of their house, Kahu would greet them and lead them out the channel. She was horrified when she found Kahu in the hands of a spearfisherman who intended to use him as a lampshade. As she was saying goodbye to her mortally wounded friend, her finger got caught in his coral-crunching beak. She holds up a crooked index finger to show me the result, grinning at her own stupidity. "It wasn't his fault," she says. "He was dying."

Before I give up my Adirondack chair and say goodbye, Audrey shows me the oversize pet door she's going to install for the seventeen-pound cat she recently got at the Humane Society. We share two glasses of cabernet sauvignon and a plate of cheese. We unroll two of her old kayaks and inspect them (one is named *Diodon*—an inflatable boat named after an inflatable fish). She tells me again of the cave she wants to visit before the winter waves come up, then hands me a mallet and sends me to the beach to move her turtle sign. As I leave, she fondly recalls what Alaska fishermen used to tell her. "They would say, 'You're paddling eight hundred miles in that?'" she says, bright eyes flashing with delight. "You must be a real nut." HH

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